*The Livingstones at Kolobeng;* by Janet Wagner Parsons. Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Pula Press, 1997. xiv, 229 pp. Maps. plates. ISBN 99912-60-17-X and 99912-61-443. (Distributed in UK by African Book Centre, London, WC2E 8JT. £25.00)

Books on Livingstone have poured off the presses ever since his death in 1873. The early hagiography may have given place to a more rounded portrait of a man with a 'dark interior' but the debunkers have not had it all their own way. Flawed but perennially fascinating, Livingstone, more than any other 'eminent Victorian' retains his magnetic attraction for both the popular imagination and scholarly labour. Although there are still gaps in our knowledge of and understanding of Livingstone – for example his scientific work deserves more contextualisation and evaluation- too much of what is published is repetitive and derivative. Is there any justification for adding another biography to an already overcrowded library shelf?

In this case, the answer is undoubtedly 'yes'. Janet Parsons brings a freshness of approach, new perspectives, new interpretations and some new sources. She focuses on the Livingstones', early years in Southern Africa (1841-1852) and especially the attempt to establish a mission station, like that of the Moffats at Kuruman, in the more inhospitable conditions of the interior on the edge of the Kalahari. This is about the Livingstones – not just Livingstone – for this is very much the story of a family, of Mary Livingstone, already a subject of study and interest in her own right, thanks to her inc1usion in Edna Healey's *Wives of fame,* and her children.

These years, preceding the great explorations, often receive rather cursory treatment in studies of Livingstone but to Janet Parsons, the experiences of these years provide the key to understanding Livingstone's subsequent compulsions and achievements. They are also important for the history of modern Botswana. Her interest began with an empathetic sense of place. She lived close to Kolobeng. Like Mary Livingstone she bore and raised children in 'the arid heart of southern Africa'. This book is dedicated to her four who like the young Livingstones 'made playthings from the seedpods of Africa and 'c1imbed among the kloofs and boulders of Kolobeng' . She explored the ruins of the mission station at Kolobeng (destroyed by the Boers and then neglected). She was just in time to catch local oral traditions, interviewing in 1983 Esther Mulunga and L. Koloi. Esther's great-grandmother, cared for in her old age by Koloi, learned her alphabet from Mary Livingstone and later served as nursemaid to Mary's sister Bessie Price, wife to a successor missionary among the Kwena. [Are there transcripts of these interviews? Where?] We get occasional glimpses of this amateur, in the original and best sense of that word, historian at work:

> 'I stood with old Koloi among the ruins, asking where the tribal town might have been. He pointed first to pockets of mosu trees, that always show human habitation – I knew he had been a horticulturalist. But it



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was not his knowledge that I wanted but memory....I searched the soil of the hillcrest above the mission. where the earth has been turned in last year's cultivation. There I found glass, English pottery and rusted iron where the daily lives of the Bahvena and the mission family had mingled'.

By bringing together a study of the scattered documentary sources, this sense of place, on the ground study and the last traces of an oral tradition, Janet Parsons creates an accurate but vivid and imaginative account of the Kolobeng years. Her African experience enables her to pick up nuances that earlier biographers have missed. Her account of the disorientation of Mary Livingstone, born and brought up in Africa, when left with her children in cold and alien Britain is moving. She is not the first to comment on the psychological price paid by Mary and her children for David's fame and achievements but she is the first to note that Mrs Livingstone's 'brief, hesitant letters' to the LMS authorities asking for money were 'written with a Setswana turn of phrase'.

She takes issue with established writers and interpretations at several points on the character of Sechele, the Kwena chief and convert, for example, and on the Boer Commando attack on the Bakwena in August 1852. It is often said that Livingstone made only one convert and he lapsed but Janet Parsons brings out the complexity of Sechele's character and of his engagement with the Christian God and the Christian scriptures. Despite his difficulties over polygamy, despite his disillusionment with Livingstone, Sechele who was fascinated by the book of Isaiah, and who was apt to retort to missionary reproof with 'David did it', was in full church membership in his later years and enjoyed good relations with Moffat's son-in-law Price, a more conventional missionary than Livingstone. Sechele long outlived Livingstone, dying the Christian chief of a Christian people in 1895. In this narrative, the Africans close to Livingstone are not the stage props and extras they are in some accounts but rounded and interesting characters. Mebalwe, a Tsawna convert from Kuruman, who accompanied Livingstone when he first went north, laboured beside him as teacher and evangelist, stayed with the Bakwena when Livingstone moved on and who is last recorded at Kuruman in the 1880s, is an unknown saint revealed in these pages.

The story of the Kolobeng years is framed by an introductory chapter on Livingstone's background and early life and a chapter on 'The aftermath and the legacy', which briefly tells 'what happened next' to the protagonists. These make the book accessible and attractive as an introductory text. There are three clear maps. These show Livingstone's journeys and the Kolobeng site, including the house layout; there are also portraits and black and white drawings of sites and episodes. These are both accurate and imaginative, if perhaps just a little too pretty. A chronology, glossary and biographical



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notes, a seven-page list of sources and secondary literature, and a competent and detailed index ensure the book is accessible and useful to both novice and expert in the field.

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